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ABSTRACT

Noting that families in home visiting early intervention programs receive only about half the number of intended visits, this research used quantitative and qualitative methods to investigate how personality and other factors affect the mother-home visitor relationship and thereby, influence home visit intensity. Participating in the study were 5 Early Head Start home visitors and 41 young Black mothers to whom the visitors were assigned. Although federal requirements stipulated at least three 90-minute home visits per month, with 3 visits by Early Head Start staff and one by Parents as Teachers educators, this requirement was not met during the first 2 program years. Analyses using multi-level modeling indicated that maternal personality-based achievement striving and desire for control were negatively related to home visit intensity (more home visits); maternal stress reaction and alienation predicted greater intensity. Home visitors' higher levels of well-being and higher levels of stress-reaction also predicted increased home visit intensity. Themes emerging from qualitative data obtained from interviews of parents and mothers include the following: (1) accuracy of information on program policies may contribute to mothers' willingness to participate; (2) establishing a close relationship with mothers and their children may affect mothers' confidence in the home visitor; (3) mothers' individual characteristics, work hours, and their similarity to the home visitor influenced service intensity; (4) home visitors tried to protect parents; and (5) some mothers' evaluations of home visitors were highly positive and inaccurate, likewise, some home visitors were overly optimistic about the mothers they served. (KB)

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Mother and Home Visitor Personality Characteristics, the Mother-Home-Visitor Relationship, and Home Visit Intensity*

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Findings From the Quantitative Analyses

Practitioners working in home visiting early intervention programs have long been challenged by agency guidelines regarding home visit frequency. Previous research suggests that regular, intensive home visits predict increased benefits for children and families in poverty (Gomby, Culross, & Berhman, 1999; Powell, 1993.) Yet, a recent report indicates that, across the country, families receive only about half the number of intended visits (Daro & Harding, 1999; Gomby et al., 1999). Research exploring the reasons why, within the same program, some parents receive more home visits than others may help practitioners address this issue.

How well a mother gets along on a personal level with her home visitor may influence the intensity of the services she receives. Accordingly, we used quantitative and qualitative methods to investigate how personality and other factors may affect the mother-home visitor relationship, and, in turn, home visit intensity.

The research participants were five Midwestern Early Head Start (EHS) home visitors, and 41 young Black mothers to whom they were assigned. Federal requirements stipulated that each family receive at least three 90-minute home visits per month. Three of these home visits were to be conducted by Early Head Start staff, and one by Parents as Teachers educators. Due to unclear expectations and personnel issues, on average this requirement was not met during the first two program years. (Later structural changes led to a reduction in the home visiting requirement. The current study pertains to the first period with the higher requirement.) All participants completed Tellegen's (1982) Multidimensional Personality Questionnaire, form NZ (MPQ) and nine of the mothers and all the home visitors were interviewed.

Home visit intensity was operationally defined as the mean number of minutes per month the home visitor spent with each mother, as determined from home visitor records. Analyses using multi-level modeling indicate that maternal personality-based achievement striving and desire for control were negatively related to home visit intensity; maternal stress reaction and alienation predicted greater intensity. Thus more "needy" mothers received more service than "non-needy" mothers. Home visitors' higher levels of well-being and lower levels of stress-reaction also predicted increased home visit intensity. No interaction effects were found.

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Themes Emerging from our Qualitative Data

Here we list the themes that have emerged from our qualitative analyses of our interviews. Please note that some of the themes pertain to the opening years of this Early Head Start program, and to home visitors who are no longer employed by the program. The themes should not be taken as necessarily reflective of the current program. We bring them forward because they address issues that we think are important for the development of new and continuing home visiting programs.

About explaining program policies to parents

Recruitment strategies that mislead mothers into thinking that enrollment in Early Head Start carries guaranteed free child care can lead to bitterness. Feeling deceived (justifiably or not) may color mothers' willingness to participate in program activities. Recruitment ads should not even hint of promises that cannot be realized.

One mother signed up for Early Head Start because she interpreted the program's radio advertising as meaning that free, high quality child care would be provided. Her home visitor was well aware that this was a big issue:

Home visitor: I just wish that [child] was at the center. That's something that she wants really bad. And I think that kinda negates me seeing her more. . . 'Cause it is like, "I was sorta promised this and it's not happening .... You know, after talking about it for a year and it's still not happening so, I will see you when it's convenient for me. And only then."

Along the same lines, mothers may have the mistaken impression that participation in one program sector will earn privileges that cannot actually be guaranteed. Honesty and clarity to mothers about program requirements and benefits are essential to keeping the good will and continued participation of mothers.

In the following quote, one hears a mother's bitterness when she was disappointed in her expectation that if she attended EHS parenting meetings, her child would be given priority in enrollment in the affiliated child care center:

Interviewer: How are you feeling about Early Head Start?

Mother: I don't go to the [parent] meetings and stuff anymore because . . . I was very faithful going to those meetings. . . . I don't go anymore. It's taking up too much of my time and they're not doing anything for me. You know what I'm saying? I enjoyed 'em [the parent meetings], don't get me wrong, but they are not doing anything for me. So, I just don't go anymore. . . . So it's like, well I'm not gonna participate. I mean, 'cause I looked at all these

parents that's getting all this help, and they not even involved like so why get all involved when they're not doing anything for me? I just don't wanna go, and I don't mind goin' you know. I really enjoy 'em, but it's a waste of time to me.

<u>About establishing closeness and confidence</u>

What mothers know about home visitors' personal lives may affect their confidence in the information imparted by the home visitors.

Interviewer: Does [home visitor] tell you stuff about kids?
Mother: Not really, 'cause she don't have any children so it's kind of, she don't know nothin'.

A mother who had great respect for her home visitor related this story:

Mother: And so, I was just crackin' up because I said, "You cook!" I said, I can't believe you cook!" I said, "You cook! You actually cook for your wife and your daughter?" He said, "Well, my daughter can't eat solid foods yet." And, he said, um, "I cook, yeah! Cook for my wife." I was like, "That is so *sweet*!" I said, "'Cause men don't cook!" I said, "They don't even want to take out their trash. I never seen this." I said, "I haven't." I said, "Not a whole meal. They probably cook some hamburger - call it a day. No french fries, no side or nothin'." He was like, "You are really going out, all out to rag on me cooking!" I said, "That is so sweet!" . . . I mean he's real nice!
Interviewer: Yeah. Have you learned things from him?
Mother: I learn a lot from him.

Establishing a warm relationship with *children* can help home visitors maintain their relationships with parents during times of waning parental interest in the intervention. Some parents continued participating in the program because they knew their children enjoyed the home visits. Children can also be a big draw for home visitors.

From our notes on a conversation with one home visitor: [Home visitor] said that she thought [mother] looked forward to the visits because she knew how much [child] liked them. Apparently, if [child] saw [home visitor] at the child care center and thought she was coming over to the house but she didn't come, he would cry and cry.

Home visits that involved mothers and home visitors in working together on non-child focused tasks that were important to mothers can play an important role in winning trust and establishing open relationships.

Home visitor: I think the time that I really, that we really connected was the time that, that we just kind of pushed everything aside because she was worried because her mom had told her she had to make dinner for everybody. She didn't have time and she didn't have time to meet me, so the whole visit was just browning hamburger and cutting up onions and cooking together. And I mean it was just like, that was just one of our, one of our key points.

Especially when relationships are new, young mothers may respond best to an indirect, soft approach that allows them to perceive the home visitor as giving them "food for thought" rather than commands. Commands are perceived as nagging. With time, after the relationship has been solidified, the home visitor can become more directive.

<u>About mothers' individual characteristics influencing service intensity</u>

Home visitors worked especially hard for the neediest mothers, while attending less to the needs of mothers who did not present crisis situations but who would have benefited from more help articulating and reaching higher goals.

Interviewer: What else can you say about the program both in good and bad ways?
Mother: Well, it's all good, um, I think you really have to be in a position where you need a lot of help … to really get the full benefit of the program.

Home visitors appreciated mothers who reached out to engage them, and such mothers received more help than others because they initiated contact with the home visitors when they hadn't heard from them in a while.

Interviewer: You're telling me that she's calling you twice a week?
Home visitor: Uh huh. She calls me about, if not once, twice a week. Just to say, "Hi, how you doing?" Or, "What are you doing?" Or, if I didn't return her call, she calls me back, "you didn't call me back."
Interviewer: Well good for her.
Home visitor: Uh huh, uh huh. That's sweet. I think we have a really good relationship.

Home visitors and mothers looked for ways in which they were similar, and seemed to feel particularly good toward each other if their personal characteristics and life stories were perceived as similar.

Home visitor: I don't criticize her for that because I can be the same way myself … I mean that's just kind of something I can really empathize with, so I don't push her.

Mother: It's just like she can relate on a lot. But now she has two children. Me too … What makes it easy is that she's, that she's going through similar … stuff like I am.

Interviewer: Do you think [mother] would have done as well with a different home visitor?
Home visitor: I think we're all good at what we do. But knowing the different staff members . . . I don't in my opinion think that that same relationship would have been formed. I don't . . . She had, we had some common things there in our lives when I was younger and I've shared with her.

Mothers whose needs could be met during regular working hours (M – F, 9-5) received more assistance than mothers whose work schedules precluded meeting with their home visitors during those hours.

Interviewer: Are there ways that you can think of that you would improve Early Head Start?
Mother: Weekend visits, some of the activities and stuff I want to make but most of 'em they're, they may start at 4:00 in the afternoon. If you have a job that's not possible. A lot of the activities start around 4:00 or 4:30 and they're ending around 6:30 so that's like…

About protectiveness and boundary issues:

Home visitors made excuses for parents they were fond of, and tried to protect them from the consequences of their mistakes.

Home visitor talking about a 20-year-old father losing his job: But he *retired* recently (itallics ours).

Boundaries and the difference between enabling and helping were salient issues for home visitors.

Home visitor: I said [to my husband], "I hate to say this but you know your car's small enough, . . . it'd be easy to maneuver. . . I said, "maybe [mother and I] could just go [practice driving] like two hours on a Sunday or something." And my husband, you know he's like, "Well is that kind of stepping over the boundary? Are we going a little bit too far?" And I'm like, "Well, I don't know Because I don't want her to buy a car unless she's got a license. Because then . . . no telling what will happen. And you got tags and insurance.

About judging effectiveness

Some mothers evaluated home visitors very positively even when outside evaluators viewed them as providing inadequate services. This may happen because mothers are not aware of the full requirements of the home visitor position or because, since they like their home visitors, they want to find excuses for them. Home visitors should not be lulled by mothers' positive regard for them into thinking they are doing a good job.

Mother talking about a home visitor who only sporadically contacted her: She's real nice. She brought our kids a gift. She brought our kids gifts on Christmas, and she's real nice.
Interviewer: Is there anything you wish that Early Head Start could do that they haven't yet, cause they're starting up, you know.

Mother: No, I'm satisfied with it.

Mothers who were disappointed in Early Head Start services seemed to separate their feelings about the program from their feelings about the home visitors. Blaming "Early Head Start" rather than the home visitors allowed mothers to maintain positive feelings for their home visitors.

From a mother who almost never received home visits:
Interviewer: Would you want a different home visitor?
Mother: No I mean I, I like her. . . I just, after a while, I wasn't getting anything out of it.

Home visitors tended to be respectful and optimistic about the mothers they served. Ironically, such positive attitudes can backfire; home visitors' confidence that mothers are taking in the information they impart may be misplaced. Home visitors may be especially likely to reassure themselves in this way when children appear to be making good developmental progress.

The following quotes are from four different interviews. All relate to the same home visitor and the same mother:

From an interview in January, 1998:
Interviewer: So what is [mother] interested in? What do you talk about?
Home visitor: We always talk about reading. [Child] loves reading.

From an interview in September, 1998:
Interviewer: And how often do you read to him?
Mother: I haven't been doin' it lately 'cause we stay gone so much, and I mean he'll get books and do it himself, but I [pause] hardly ever now.

From an interview in December, 1998:
Home visitor: I know that when [mother] first started in the program she wasn't doing a lot of home activities with [child] besides you know, bathing him and feeding him and, and things like that. But I've noticed like with his memory skills I could tell that she's reading to him.

From an interview in February, 2000:
Interviewer: What sort of style seems to work best with [mother]?
Home visitor: Informative. And even though she may not want you there, she's still listening. She's absorbing the information. (In further conversation, the home visitor explained that she bases this conclusion on the child's apparent intelligence.)